

MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

# SURDAS

USHA NILSSON



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To  
**Dr. Amiya Chakravarty**

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Surdas, the poet, singer and devotee carries under his name several thousands of poems, in Brajbhasha. They are mostly lyrical, originally sung as an integral part of the poet's devotion. The most well known collection is titled *Sursagar* i.e. the Ocean of Sur.

Even if one ignores the religious aspect of Surdas, that he was a worshipper of Krishna and completely dedicated to him, body, soul and mind; or that it was a part of his commitment to sing about Krishna's life and divine sports, the fact remains that he holds a very high place in medieval Hindi poetry, based just on the literary merits of his lyrics. These lyrics, known as *padas*, were the most popular style for singing of devotional songs in the medieval period. Originating with Siddha poets, this poetic form was polished and honed by poets like Jayadeva and Vidyapati. The *padas* were always sung, mostly in traditional Indian mode of ragas. The form slowly but steadily spread over North India, its flow getting impetus through the musicians and devout worshippers. The oral tradition, an inherent part of Indian life and religion, also helped to keep the form and the text of the *padas* alive for centuries. It also attracted legends and stories and pithy sayings about the poets.

The popular and most prevalent image of Surdas, in the mind of a common man in Hindi speaking area, is that of a blind, dedicated poet who was a great worshipper of Krishna, and who was rescued by Krishna himself when he fell into a well and could not get out for seven days. The most commonly quoted verse about Surdas, in the tradition of Hindi poetry is,

“Sur soor, Tulsi sasi, udugan Keshaydas.”

(Surdas is the sun, Tulsidas the moon, and Keshaydas a star.)

thus giving him the highest ranking, even above Tulsidas, another great poet and devotee. Tansen, one of the nine gems in

Emperor Akbar's court, and a celebrated musician is attributed to have said the following about Surdas,

*"Kindhaun sur ko sar lagyo  
kindhaun sur ki pir  
Kindhaun sur ko pada lagyo  
Bendhyaun sakal sarir"<sup>1</sup>*  
(Some are hurt by a warrior's arrow  
some are tortured by pain  
Those hit by Sur's lyrics  
are pierced, through and through)

These sayings, on the one hand, indicate that Surdas is held with great regards in different traditions, literary, artistic and musical, on the other hand, they illuminate the fact of his universal appeal to human heart. Probably that is the main reason why his devotional songs continue to be sung even after five centuries.

## II

The facts about Surdas' life and compositions are more limited than his other contemporary poets. The most detailed account is found in a hagiographical chronicle, *Chaurasi Vaishnavan Ki Varta* (the narrative about eighty-four Vaishnavas) and its edited version *Bhav Prakash* penned in 1698 A.D. The narrative about Surdas contains six chapters, and according to these *'artas*, he was born in 1478 A.D., and died, after a long life, between 1581-1585 A.D. He was a disciple of Vallabhacharya (1478-1530) the founder of Pushti sect. Later on Surdas assumed a very important place in the sect and was honored as being one of the eight important poets, called *Ashtachhap*, or Eight Seals (of the sect). Since *Varta* is the writing of this sect it is but natural that in the biography of Surdas his coming into contact with Vallabhacharya and his initiation into Pushtimarg is highlighted. Written in a simple, flowing and easy conversational style, the *Varta* describes their first meeting.

"Once Shri Acharya, the Great Master (Vallabhacharya) came to Braj from Arail. Surdas was living at Gaughat. Surdas was an ascetic, in service of the Lord, and sang very beautifully. Many people were his disciples. So when Shri Acharya descended at Gaughat, Surdas' followers, having seen him, went to Surdas and said, Today the Acharya has come, the Great One who has conquered the South and defeated all its great pundits. Then Surdas came, from his place, to pay homage. The Acharya Mahaprabhu said, Surdas, come and please be seated. Then Surdas paid homage to him and sat down. Shri Acharya said, Surdas, sing some of the praise of the Lord. Surdas replied, Whatever you command, and then sang a pada.

O lord,  
I am the crown amongst the sinners.  
The others are just the beginners  
I have been born a crook.  
To Ajamil, the hunter, and to the whore  
even to poison-breasted Putana  
you granted salvation.  
You have shown favors to all  
but me.  
This hurts.  
I claim, emphatically, confidently  
that nobody else  
is as capable of sinning  
as I have been.  
Still amidst the sinners,  
and crooks,  
I; Sur, die of shame.  
for not having had  
your favor.  
Who else, deserves your grace  
More than I?

So Great Master said, why do you plead in such humble terms, you are a warrior, (pun on Hindi word 'sur') aren't you? Describe the lila (divine play) of the Lord. Then Surdas said, Great One! I am unable to understand (the complexity)

of the lila. Shri Acharya said, Go and bathe, and then I shall explain it all to you. When Surdas came back after bathing, then first of all the Great Master made him hear the name of the Lord, and had offerings made and then told him the order of the tenth Canto (of *Bhagavat Purana*). (Hearing that, and by its good merit) all his sins were washed away, and Surdas obtained nine-fold aspects of bhakti. From then on Surdas (sang) of Lord's lila....After that Surdas created many, many padas....Acharya, the Great Master recited for him *Purushottam Sahasranam* and then the entire *Bhagavata* sprouted in Surdas' heart; so whatever padas he created after-wards described the *Bhagavata* from the first to the twelfth Canto.

Shri Acharya, the Great Master, stayed at Gaughat for three days and then started towards Braj. Then Shri Great Master uttered these words, Surdas, now look at Gokul, so Surdas bowed to Gokul, and as he paid obeisance, the lila of child Krishna was born in his heart....Surdas thought to describe the lila of Krishna's childhood to the Acharya.... Shri Great Master pondered in his heart that at Shrinath (temple) all arrangements have been made for worship, but none for the singing of devotional songs, that now be given to Surdas...." 2

The other writings of Vallabha sects either elaborate or reiterate the narrative of the *Varta*. They are *Bhava Prakash* written between 1643 to 1671 A.D. and *Vallabha Digvijaya* (1601).

According to *Bhav Prakash*, Surdas was born in the family of a Saraswat Brahmin, in the village Sihi, near Delhi. He was blind from the birth. He was endowed with oracular powers and could tell the whereabouts of lost things and could also correctly answer questions about the future. He left his home as a child and lived near a pond, not far away from Sihi. At the age of eighteen he moved to Gaughat where he lived till the age of thirty one, when his meeting with Vallabhacharya occurred. By this time he had gathered a considerable following, and along with his oracular powers, was already becoming famous for his sacred songs. An accomplished musician, he sang most padas of submission, humility and request. After his appointment as



the official devotional singer at the temple of Shrinathji by Vallabhacharya, he spent the rest of his life in Braj area. He died in Parasoli, in the presence of Vallabhacharya's son and successor Vitthal Nath.

The prevalent belief in Vallabh sect is that Surdas was ten days younger than Vallabhacharya. In his *Nij Varta*, Gokulnath has mentioned this fact.<sup>3</sup> *Bhav Prakash* also supports this.

Of other things that could be culled out of these sectarian writings, two are of special interest. One is about the origin of the name Surdas. One of the characteristic features of pada style is the *bhanita* or the mention of the poet's name in the last line, and we find at least five variations of Surdas' names in padas attributed to him. The most prevalent names, of course, are Sur and Surshyam, but Suraj, Surajdas and Surdas are frequently found. One simple explanation, of course, is that while singing these padas, the names were elaborated or abbreviated according to the rhythm and the beat of the music. *Bhav Prakash* throws a more interesting light on these variations. According to it, Vallabhacharya called him 'Sur'.

"Just as a warrior never turns back in a battlefield, and goes forward, ahead of everyone, in the same manner, Surdas' devotion became higher and higher. That is why Acharya (Vallabha) called him Sur. And Shri Gosain (Vitthal Nath) called him Surdas. Surdas' humility and the feeling of servitude to the Lord never diminished. The more devoted he became, the more his humility increased. Surdas never acquired any pride. That is why he was called by the name Surdas."<sup>4</sup>

The second, and of interest, is the account of Surdas' meeting with Akbar. Apparently the two were brought together through the efforts of Tansen, the celebrated singer of Akbar's court. The meeting as such is not so important as the fact that Akbar seemed to have asked Surdas about his blindness. This oblique reference supports the theory that Surdas was blind, at least when he met Akbar.

The other well-known sources about Surdas' life and works, besides *Chaurasi Vaishnavan ki Varta*, *Nij Varta*, *Bhav Prakash* and *Vallabha Digvijaya* are: *Bhaktamal* by Nabha Das; Persian

sources, Abul Fazl's *Ain-e-Akbari* and his letters; a passing reference to certain dates in Surdas' own writings, about the composition of the poems, and his guru; and popular myths and legends.

Some of the Sur scholars in Hindi and most of the Western scholars have questioned the credibility of accounts in sectarian writings. Their main argument is that these writings cannot be taken as valid since they were recorded only for one purpose, and that is, to glorify the sect. Therefore it becomes relevant and necessary, to examine the authenticity of *Varta* before accepting its version of Surdas and his life.

One must, however, remember that most of the knowledge was being transmitted orally in medieval times. Just as Vedas were memorized by some people of privileged classes and their form kept intact, the latter religious literature and information surrounding it, must have been kept quite intact in little privileged groups. Vallabha sect probably was no exception. If *Varta* was recorded at the time of Vallabhacharya's grandson, and later revised and edited by him and his close followers, it would be presumptuous to dismiss the sectarian writing entirely as biased.

The *Varta* originated in 1689 A.D. Its central theme was the lives and good deeds of illustrious devotees. It came into being quite accidentally as a result of conversation and dialogue between two devotees, Govardhan Das and Krishna Bhatta. Apparently they sat and talked about illustrious worshippers for three days. Soon after Krishna Bhatta had them recorded and read the various stories by himself. At his death, his son presented this manuscript, small and handy sized, to Gokulnath, who was much touched and made it a practice of narrating a few of the life stories from this book to his select group of followers. Every evening he had the book locked up. His son Vitthalesh without his father's knowledge had this original manuscript copied by scribe Narayandas. From this first duplicate a few more copies were made and *Varta* became more known.

Gokulnath, who lived from 1551 to 1604 A.D., is attributed to have the *Varta* rearranged and divide the Vaishnava devotees into two groups, according to their guru. He also added more and gave the book the title by which it is known, *Chaurasī Vaishnavan ki Varta*. He is also credited with having narrated

*Nij Varta* (Own Chronicle).

Both the Vartas were later edited by Hari Rai (born 1591 A.D.) in his *Bhav Prakash* which was written between 1643 and 1671 A.D. 1695 A.D. is the date on the manuscript of *Bhav Prakash* that is still preserved in the sect.

*Vallabh Digvijaya* (1601 A.D.) was written by Yadunath, the sixth son of Vitthal Nath. Surdas, if one accepts *Varta* and other books was alive at this time.

Much of the confusion and the controversy about *Varta* arose when Ram Chandra Shukla, in his *History of Hindi Literature* discounted its authenticity. He mentioned that even though the *Varta* is attributed to Gokulnath, it could have been written much later by one of his Gujrati disciples.<sup>5</sup> But he did not substantiate this hypothesis in any manner.

Latter critics and Sur scholars,<sup>6</sup> after going to the different seats of Vallabha sects, and thoroughly checking out the earliest manuscripts have established that there is no reason to dismiss the *Varta*. That *Varta* and *Bhav Prakash* contain valid information about Surdas, has found more or less wide acceptance. It is true that most of this material was gathered at the time of the grandson of Vallabhacharya. Yet, one outstanding characteristic of Indian religious texts and beliefs is the correctness and the care that was taken in transmitting it from father to son, from teacher to special pupil. Therefore one can safely assume that the successors and the followers of Vallabhacharya tried to preserve facts about his life and his distinguished disciples very carefully. Since Surdas brought so much religious fervor and glory to the sect by his own devotion, special attention must have been bestowed upon him.

*Bhaktamal*, composed in 1603 A.D. by Nabhadas, is also a work about devotees. It has been accepted as having no sectarian bias. Unfortunately it does not say much about Surdas, except extolling the high calibre of his bhakti, the gifts of his music and poetry and the fact that he was blind from birth.

In the Persian sources, and one which has also created some confusion about Surdas is *Ain-e-Akbari*, a historical work by Abul Fazl. Written in 1597 A.D., it contains the names of the musicians and the singers in Akbar's court. It is mentioned that there was a father-son team of musicians named Ramdas and Surdas. Some literary historians, like Grierson<sup>7</sup> have chosen to

believe that this Surdas was also the poet Surdas, the composer of *Sursagar*. He was not a disciple of Vallabhacharya, but was shown to be such in religious writings because it brought glory and fame to the sect.

It is more probable that there were two Surdases, the name Surdas or Surajdas is a common one, one the poet, ascetic and devotee and the other a court musician. Surdas the devotee must have been eightyfive or so when Akbar's court opened itself to welcome the artists and the musicians 'like Tansen. Secondly, it has been established that Surdas the devotee, spent most of his life in Srinath temple, not at any court. The singer Surdas was a regular at Akbar's court. An important though ephemeral argument against the court musician and the religious poet as being one and the same person is the essence of Surdas' poetry itself. The basic and underlying mood of all his poetry is that of devotion and complete dedication to Krishna. It blends more harmoniously with temple surroundings rather than an Emperor's court. Surdas, the creator of *Sursagar*, was a humble man and could not have cared much for the pomp and glory of Akbar's court. Considering these factors, one can assume quite confidently that the singer in Akbar's court must have been someone else with a similar name and musical talents but not the devotee Surdas.

Another Persian source that caused some confusion is *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* by Abdulqadir Badayuni. In a letter, sent to someone named Surdas, who lived in Varanasi, a suggestion was made to present himself before the Emperor Akbar when he visited Allahabad. It was to ask Akbar to redress some grievances that this Surdas had against someone. Akbar visited Allahabad in 1601 A.D., and Surdas, the singer of *Sur's Ocean*, was long dead by this time.

Going to Surdas's own writings, we find some references in *Sur Saravali* and *Sahitya Lahri*. Apparently Surdas wrote *Sur Saravali* after finishing with the major bulk of *Sursagar*. He did not mention anything about his birth or background; only that he finished this composition when he was sixtyseven years old.

But the greater controversy centers around two poems in *Sahitya Lahri*, one telling the year it was composed and the other referring to the poet's family tree. According to the poem

109, *Sahitya Lahri* could have been composed in Samvat 1607, 1617, or 1627, depending on how one word is interpreted.<sup>8</sup> In overall picture it does not matter which date it was written, except if one takes the last date it would indicate that Surdas was alive in Samvat 1627 (1570 A.D.)

The second verse, giving his family tree tells a different story than the sectarian sources. It makes him a direct descendent of famous bard Chand, who was a close friend, and the court poet of Prithvi Raj. According to this poem, Surdas was born near Agra where his father had settled. Surdas had six elder brothers who all died in battles, fighting valiantly. Surdas was spared because he was blind from birth. One day he fell into a well and remained there, undiscovered for six days. Lord Krishna himself rescued him on the seventh day, and restored his sight. Then he told Surdas to ask for a boon. Surdas chose to have his blindness because after seeing Krishna's divine form, he didn't wish to set eyes on any other being.

It is commonly agreed that this poem is an interpolation in the book. It could have been added to the manuscript by a bard named Surajchand.

There are many legends surrounding Surdas, most of them centering around his blindness. The most commonly believed, of course, is that of Surdas falling into a well due to his blindness and being rescued by Krishna. It is widely accepted that Surdas was blind from birth. He had a siddhi (divine power) and could tell about the location of lost things. According to this legend when he was six he told his parents where their lost money was and later on, predicted correctly the place where lost cows that belonged to the landlord had strayed. The landlord was so pleased that he built a nice hut for him, where Surdas lived till he was eighteen.

There is some controversy among the critics whether Surdas was blind from the birth or became blind later on. Certainly his use of light and dark, the effective color imagery and natural behaviour of people belies the fact that he was born blind. Perhaps the legend, that Surdas, as a young man was wildly in love with a most beautiful woman and had her pierce his eyes as a proof of love, has its root in similar belief.

More convincing story as a proof of blindness is his meeting with Akbar. Apparently Surdas' genius as a poet and a musician

was brought to Akbar's attention by Tansen. As a liberal and religiously tolerant king, Akbar wished to meet him. This meeting took place and Akbar requested Surdas to sing, subtly hinting to hear his own praise. Surdas, then, sang the following song,

No more room  
remains in my heart.  
It is the son of Nanda  
who lives there  
always, all the time.  
How is it, then, possible  
to let someone else  
even come in?  
In the waking hours  
in the dreams at night  
his face  
never goes away from my heart  
not even for a moment.  
People tell tales, O Uddho,  
they try to tempt me.  
But what can I do?  
My heart, so full of love  
is like a clay pitcher  
into which an ocean cannot be poured.  
Surdas sings only of dark  
and lotus faced Krishna  
of his soft and sweet smile.  
It is for the vision of him  
that my eyes thirst  
eternally.

Akbar jestingly asked, how could Surdas' eyes be thirsting for a vision, when he was unable to see.

Another popular and prevalent belief is that Surdas wrote 125,000 padas.

### III

The worship of Krishna, as Vishnu's incarnation, is the core of Surdas' bhakti. Krishna is his Lord and master, friend and companion. He is also a naughty child of Nand and Yashoda as well as the object of love and worship of girls and women (gopis) in Brindavan. Surdas devoted his long life and thousands of padas singing about Krishna's multitudinous aspects and divine sports. Krishna, as Supreme God, truly became a source of ultimate truth, consciousness and eternal bliss for him. Surdas inherited a rich tradition of bhakti (devotion) with its different philosophies, attitudes and sectarian interpretations.

In religious literature there were two major and parallel streams. On the one hand Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* and Vidyapati's love songs were very popular and incorporated Srīngar rasa (the erotic mood) into the worship of Krishna, on the other hand was the tradition of Siddha, Nath and Sant poets who were singers and preachers who believed in an attributeless God.

It is a recorded fact that Jayadeva had become known in Western India, by the 13th Century.<sup>9</sup> Nabhadās included Jayadeva as the devotee in his *Bhaktamal*, which indicated that Jayadeva was well known and respected in Brajbhasha area. The core of his poetry is the intense love between Krishna and his favorite girl, Radha, their suffering at the separation and deep joy at being together. Jayadeva told this story in a poetic, sensuous and lyrical manner. The descriptions were sometimes explicit, the followers of his tradition saw them as an allegory of love on a divine and a higher plane. On a simple human level this love relationship struck a sympathetic chord in most people. Jayadeva set his verses in Indian raga system, by naming the mode in which the lyric was to be sung. He also popularized *bhanita* i.e. mention of his name in the last stanza of his poem.

Vidyapati, composing almost two centuries later, earned the title of the 'New Jayadeva'.<sup>10</sup> He also sang of Radha and Krishna and their love for each other. But unlike *Gita Govinda*, he had no story structure; each song was a separate entity, self contained, concentrating only on one mood, one emotion. He

also brought in his poetry Radha's point of view, her emotions, her suffering. This innovation added beauty and softness to his lyrics.

It can safely be assumed that Surdas was aware of both these traditions. Worshipping Krishna not only as lord and master, but also as a friend and lover, Jayadeva and Vidyapati's bias must have held a strong appeal for him. This is not to say that Surdas in his poetry and in religion blindly followed the love tradition; he adopted it and brought to it his own creative richness.

The second, but equally important stream, was of poets like Namdeva, Kabir and Dadu, who constantly emphasised the forsaking of all worldly attachments and involvements, in order to seek union with God. The humility and supplication were the major notes of this poetry.

Surdas took a definite stand as to why he chose to sing of Supreme God with attributes (guṇas),

My mind runs in circles,  
bewildered.  
Finding nothing to grasp,  
no support  
in Formless, who is  
Faceless, attributeless  
No lines, no characteristics,  
Considering it, in everyway  
inaccessible  
Sur decides to sing of  
Incarnate God Hari  
and his various lilas.

For the clear cut concepts and the crystallization of the ideas of bhakti the *Bhagvad Gita* is the most important religious document of the Hindus. The *Bhagvad Gita* set out the course of bhakti for the worshippers of Vishnu, called Vaishnavas, by focusing the limelight on Krishna, and the importance of total devotion to him. It also tried to synthesize ideas and religious ways that had already formed and were flourishing. The philosophy of the *Gita* gave due importance to the way of knowledge, the way of actions and to the way of devotion.<sup>11</sup> The followers



of different paths could all find justification for their kind of religious pursuits and learnings, but undoubtedly *Gita* glorified and emphasized the importance of bhakti.

The eleventh and the twelfth cantos of *Gita* explained the concepts of bhakti in detail. In the last canto, Krishna assured Arjuna that whoever came to him in total devotion and utter dependency, his sins would be destroyed. This idea, which became the foundation of dasya bhava (of servitude) took a very strong hold on the devotees and almost every religious poet sung of this form of bhakti.

*Gita* also clarified the worship of attributeless (nirguṇa) and incarnate (saguṇa) God. Krishna emphasized the latter because almost everyone was capable of this kind of devotion, but only knowledgeable and learned people could grasp the idea behind the nirguṇa form.

A true bhakta, according to *Gita*, has or should develop the following qualities, he should be

1. friendly to all, loving all the worldly creatures without any wish of any kind of return.
2. free from all worldly attachments and of desires.
3. taking with equal calm the profit and loss, joy and sorrow, honor or ill-repute.
4. one who has controlled the sense organs, the heart and mind.
5. forgiving, at peace, compassionate, unegoistic, unenvious.
6. dedicating to Krishna the good merits earned from deeds.
7. faithful to his God.

The external expressions of this devotion, which became the basic tenets of bhakti, were also spelled out in *Gita*. If a person followed certain ways faithfully and devotedly, they evoked and created the right atmosphere for the right emotion and feelings. Not everyone could evoke the feelings of love and dedication towards God right away, so it was necessary to start with the basics and move inwards. These tenets became the mainstay of temple and personal worship, and were: *smaraṇ*, remembering the God; *shravaṇ*, listening to his praise and good deeds; *archana*, worship of the Image; *kirtan*, chanting and singing; *vandana*, prayer. Along with these propagators of bhakti, emotionally dedicating oneself to Krishna was also important. Thus the germinal ideas of bhakti were laid down in *Gita*. Later on,

the Puranas took them up and elaborated on them as philosophy, the ways and the forms of bhakti, especially the *Bhagvat Purana* which became a great moving force in Surdas' life and poetry.

Amongst all the incarnations of Vishnu, the *Bhagvat Purana* emphasized Krishna's *avatar*. The story of Krishna's birth, his childhood, and growing up in Brindavan, killing the demons on one hand, and becoming every one's centre of love, is fully described in it. The *Bhagvat Purana* also stressed the importance of a *guru* (teacher). It was the guru who initiated and instructed the disciple. It was he who led the disciple on the right path.

The concept of ninefold (*navadha*) bhakti crystallized in *Bhagvat Purana*. Almost all the religious poets in Hindi devoted themselves to these aspects naturally and spontaneously. Their poetry became an expression of their devotion and not an instrument for seeking fame or money. The quality of their bhakti was heightened by their creativity just as their poetic gifts were nurtured by it.

Briefly, the regimen that was carried out by a true devotee, was

1. *Shravaṇa*, hearing the praise of one's Lord, being sung or narrated.
2. *Kirtana*, singing, chanting and reciting (it was to this function that Surdas was appointed by Vallabhacharya, according to *Varta* narrative, at the temple of Srinathji).
3. *Smarana*, constantly thinking of one's beloved Lord, and recollecting his deeds or divine play and games.
4. *Padasevana*, service of the Lord's feet (this is the reason why the mention of 'lotus feet' of Krishna or Rama is so frequent in Surdas, Mirabai and Tulsi poetry).
5. *Archana*, offering worship to the Image, established in a temple or in a home.
6. *Vandana*, praying.
7. *Dasya*, servitude. the relationship between the devotee and the God is that of the servant and the master.
8. *Sakhya*, the feeling of companionship, of friendliness and equality between the devotee and his God.
9. *Atmanivedan*, total and honest expression of one's feelings, requests and entreaties.

Interestingly, the nirguṇa bhaktas followed the seven aspects

as set above. Since the nirguṇa devotees did not believe in incarnations or a God with attributes or form, the worship of the Image and the serving the feet, were omitted.

*Bhagvat Purana* depicted God, especially Krishna, as very beautiful. He, being divine, attracted all hearts, all minds to him. The basically good and the devout went to him naturally, like rivers flowing to the ocean. Everyone in Braj was attached to him, loved him one way or the other. Nand, Yashoda, Krishna's foster parents, and the older women of Braj loved him as a parent loves a child (*vatsalya*), the men and cowherds regarded him a friend and equal (*sakhya*), the young women and girls felt for him the love of a beloved for the lover or of a wife for her husband (*madhur*). Not only human beings but the birds, the animals, the nature, groves, thickets, river were all imbued in the color of Krishna. The deep love and attachment (*āsakti*) of the Braj people expressed itself in eleven ways, in two aspects beyond ninefold bhakti. They were, total absorption in Krishna and the stricken state of sorrow at his separation (*viraha*).

The tradition of bhakti from the *Gita* and the *Puranas* was disseminated to the people by different sects, great teachers and literature. The Vaishnava cult flourished as far back as in 4th-6th A.D., at the time of Gupta emperors, all over North India but its crystallization in poetic form in regional languages took place in South India. This thrust and emotional direction came from a group of saints-singers-poets called 'Alvars' whose works span several centuries, especially from 7th to 9th, in Tamil.

The four great Vaishnavas, instrumental in the revival of bhakti movement in North India, were Ramanujacharya, Madhwacharya, Vishnu Swami and Nimbarkacharya. This Vaishnava movement was very much in evidence at the time of Surdas. But it was Vallabhacharya, in the tradition of Vishnu Swami, who became very important to Surdas' life. Vallabhacharya was a very learned pundit who travelled all over India, especially South India, where he defeated many pundits in debates, propounding his own doctrine, *Shuddhadvaitvad* or 'pure non-dualism'.<sup>12</sup>

Briefly stated, he believed that God contained the qualities of *sat* (truth), *chit* (consciousness) and *ananda* (bliss), and as Sadananda he was personified in Krishna. Even though a transcendent God, he assumed worldly roles and human quali-

ties for creating his own *lila*, divine sports and games or for the sake of his worshippers. This world was real, not an illusion as Shāṅkara propounded, but its perception by beings could be wrong or warped. Actually the world or *samsara* was a form of *Brahman* and all *jivas* (human souls) were inseparable from him, just as the sparks were inseparable from fire.

Bhakti, according to Vallabhacharya, was the chief means of salvation. But the final goal of a bhakta was not *moksha*, but total immersion in Krishna (*sayujya*) and full participation in his *lila* in celestial Brindavan.

To Vallabhacharya and his followers, the grace or favor of God was very important, it was through God's *pushti* (strengthening or nurturing) that a devotee could hope to attain him. He had to make himself the right kind of vessel or be rightly eligible to be favored by God's *pushti*, and he could do it, by having a steadfast and the highest form of love possible for God and by remembering him constantly, never allowing himself to forget the knowledge of his greatness and splendor. The devotee had to prove himself worthy of this grace by continuous and constant effort. This special way, of being favored by God, came to be known as *pushtimarg*—the way of *pushti*.

Vallabhacharya stressed four kinds of feelings that can exist between a devotee and his God; parental love (*vatsalya*), servitude (*dasya*), friendliness (*sakhya*) and love (*mādhurya*). These relationships established the dominant mood or emotion (*boava*) of a person's bhakti. A devotee could experience and express all the four moods and they were not mutually exclusive. However, he considered love (*madhur*) as the highest form of bhakti. The ultimate bliss of the union with one's lover (in this case Krishna) and the sorrow at being separated from him, both became conducive to a finer and higher form of devotion. In deep obsessive love the devotee (personified by the gopis, young women of Braj) mind became fixed on Krishna, causing constant remembrance, an essential part of ninefold devotion. This love went through three stages, it started as *sneh* (affection) and changed to *āsakti* (attachment) and culminated in *vyasan* (addiction).

Vallabhacharya introduced an elaborate system of worship and ritual in the temple of Srinathji. It was clearcut and had to be carried out eight times a day. For special festivals, like *Holi*, rituals were celebrated with greater pomp. Devotional music and

the presence of musicians was an integral part of these day to day ceremonies. The devotee poets who were also accomplished singers were assigned definite times and duties when they had to be present in the temple and they sang their compositions, suitable to the occasion of worship. The main themes, however, were always of love and union. The temple schedule ran on these lines.<sup>18</sup>

1. *Mangala*, consisted of waking up Krishna and lasted from 5 to 7 a.m. The padas of love, of waking up Krishna, butterchurning were sung.
2. *Shringar*, (ornamentation and decoration), from 7 to 8 a.m., the central theme of padas was the description of Krishna's beauty, his attire, jewellery, and his playfulness as a child.
3. *Gval*, 9 to 10 a.m., the predominant note was companionship; Krishna's play with other fellow cowherds, milking of the cows, his butter stealing, offering of fresh milk foam to him.
4. *Rajbhog*, lasted from ten to noon. The noon meal was offered to Srinathji.
5. *Utthan*, lasted from 3.30 to 4.30 p.m., when Surdas sang the padas, of Krishna in the groves and thickets of Brindavan, grazing the cows, and carrying on his divine sports and love games.
6. *Bhog*, took place at five p.m., and the major themes at this occasion were about Krishna's beauty, the love of gopis, the flute songs, Krishna's special cows and his friend.
7. *Evening Arati*, took place at half past six in the evening. The parental love dominated the song content.
8. *Shayan*, from seven to eight p.m., when Krishna was settled to sleep for the night in the temple. The padas that were sung were of love, of union, the playing with the gopis.

The Krishna cult at this period had many many poets and devotees. It was Vallabhachary's son Vitthal Nath who, in 1545 A.D., selected eight poets, who were a cut above the ordinary ones, and distinguished them by calling the group *Ashtachhap*, Eight Seals or Eight Companions. Surdas was accepted without any doubt the most important one in this group. The other poets were Paramananddas, Kumbhandas, Krishnadas, Nanddas, Chaturbhuj das, Govinalswami and Chhitsuwami. Though Surdas was the main poet to be appointed by Vallabhacharya in 1510

A.D.; the other poets were also given responsibility and turns at being present at the temple rituals and worship. Later on, it was only at *Rajbogh* and *Bhog* that all eight companions and poets were required to be present. This schedule in no way diminished Surdas' importance as a poet or an honoured disciple of the Vallabha sect. He, till the end of his life, sang ceaselessly about Krishna and of his love.

The evidence from the *Varta* and other sources had indicated that Surdas, before his meeting with Vallabhacharya, was already living a life of an ascetic. He had earned fame for his poetic and musical abilities, but the main note of his poetry and devotion was that of *dasya*. It was Vallabhacharya who encouraged him to sing of Krishna's lilas as a child and a lover. He recounted for Surdas' benefit, his own *Commentary* or *Elucidation of Bhagvat*, Surdas might have been aware of the growing popularity of child Krishna in bhakti movement. There is no doubt that a greater emphasis was placed on Krishna's childhood in Vallabha sect. It is too easy, however, to give all the credit for Surdas' development as an all round bhakta to Vallabhacharya's initiation and guidance as a guru. Even if this historic meeting between the guru and the distinguished disciple hadn't taken place, one can safely and confidently say that Surdas' devotion, his poetical genius and his love for Krishna would have continued to be expressed. He would have carved out a special place in Krishna bhakti tradition and religious poetry in Hindi anyway. There have been other poets, for example, Mirabai who did not join any sect, or did not have a special guru, yet left an indelible mark on the bhakti tradition. But there is no doubt, that in Surdas' case Vallabha's doctrines and an assignment for singing devotional songs in specific musical modes, and specific contents gave his bhakti and poetry a definite direction and thrust.

Surdas subscribed to all the tenets of ninefold bhakti as set down in *Bhagvat*, and in way of pushti. They found ample expression in his poetry and are extensively scattered throughout his works.

Surdas believed that a bhakta can serve Krishna in two major ways, by emotionally committing himself to him, and reinforcing it by a life style concomitant with ninefold bhakti, e.g., by singing Krishna's praise, by keeping company with like minded devotees, contributing money to the good cause (like Pooran

Mull Khatri's restoration of Srinathji's temple), alms-giving.

It seems that Surdas, in his humble and nonassuming ways was infinitely grateful to his guru. He felt that one needed a guru to illuminate one's mind and to lead. He praised Vallabhacharya, by reference like.

(a)

My trust in these feet  
is unwavering.  
The splendour of Vallabha's toenails is,  
for me,  
like the moon, without  
which the world is dark.

(b)

Save me now, O Shri Vallabha!  
I am known  
Best amongst the sinners.

(c)

Good or bad  
Whatever I am,  
I am yours, O Vallabha!

Surdas adopted the precepts laid down in *pushtimarg*, but he was less preoccupied by its philosophical aspect and more with that of personal devotion. He expressed all four bhavas, but his main mood is of Sakhya.

Surdas' bhakti and poetry cannot be separated, they are mutually dependent. They make his life and works an essential Indian religious experience.

#### IV

At one point it does not matter if Surdas was blind or not. Reading his poetry one gets a very strong and clear impression of a world which is especially his own. It is, in many ways, pat-

turned on the external world, but it is his inner world that is constantly awashed with the colour and beauty of Krishna. It is completely devoted to Krishna and his lilas. It is a world in which love is the dominant emotion. It is favoured by Krishna's grace, compassion and divine powers. The setting is pastoral and idyllic, villages surrounded by hills and forests. The river Yamuna flows nearby. All kinds of flora and fauna abound. The people seem ordinary enough, carrying out their work and enjoying family life, yet they are not ordinary because they live in Braj and love Krishna, who has been brought to them by his father to grow unharmed. The people don't know it, yet they are amazed at extraordinary happenings. This world has demons, storms, vicious serpents, angry gods like Indra; but people are protected by Krishna. They accept it, with a simplicity of village people.

The structure of this village is traditional. The men herd the cattle, women stay home, cook food, milk the cows, churn butter and go out to sell it. Children tease each other, older one gang-ing up on the younger one; they play many games in the lanes and by the river. Prompted by their leader, in this case, Krishna, they are always doing some mischief, and being scolded when caught. The women get together in leisure hours, complain to each other about the impossibility of controlling Krishna, their chief's son. The childbirths, birthdays, appearing of baby teeth, first giving of solid food, ear piercing, all are celebrated with great joy, as are the special festivals. Women adorn themselves in their finery on such occasions. Mother scold young daughters in love, mothers-in-law show displeasure. The women in Surdas' world have great solidarity, they all love Krishna, they share the same joys and same sorrows. They console each other when he leaves them. Yet Surdas is more than aware of the psychological complexities of the human mind. His women might be village women, but they are clever, loquacious, expressive, using sarcasms, taunts and many devices to get their feelings across. They could accept Radha as Krishna's favourite, but when they hear that he has forsaken them and even Radha, for a hunch-backed maid-servant in the city, their jealous and anger knows no bounds.

It is amazing how Surdas, himself an ascetic, knew the family life, its responsibilities and pleasures. He created in his world an



ideal relationship between the man and his universe. There is harmony and equilibrium. In every way Surdas' world is the celestial Brindavan where everything follows its course without any discord.

Pain and sorrow come to this world only at the absence of Krishna. The flowers wilt, the animals grow thin, the river becomes sluggish and the abandoned Radha reaches death's door. Death is mentioned by Surdas, but only when a yearning, pining soul is separated from Krishna. One can only marvel at Surdas's acute perception and his knowledge of the external world. His inner world is so real that it belies the fact that he was blind and could not actually see the world whose image he was creating in brilliant, shimmering colors.

## V

Though sixteen works are attributed to Surdas only three are of major literary importance.

1. *Sursagar*
2. *Sursaravali*
3. *Sahitya Lahari*
4. Govardhan Lila
5. The Commentary on the Tenth Canto (of *Bhagvat*).
6. Nagalila
7. Sada Sangraha
8. Pran Pyari (The engagement of Shyam)
9. Byahlo
10. Bhagvat
11. Surpachisi
12. Surdas' pada
13. Sursagar Sar
14. The beneficial glory of Ekadashi
15. Ram's birth
16. Nala Damayanti

Surdas' fame rests on the collection of poems in a volume called *Sursagar*. According to a legend *Sursagar* contained 125,000 songs, but not more than 6,000 have been found, out of

which approximately 5,000 have been authenticated. Its manuscripts are found in two forms; either arranged in twelve chapters or as anthologies of short and long poems. It is likely that Surdas sang various unconnected padas at the temple of Srinathji according to occasion and mood and later on these were arranged in twelve chapters. As Surdas himself mentioned that he patterned his *Sursagar* on the *Bhagavat Purana*.

“Vyasa narrated it to Sukdeva in twelve chapters.

Surdas sings the same in bhasha-padas.”

and

“I sing according to *Bhagavat*, owing to my Guru’s favor.”

But in no way is *Sursagar* a translation, or a vernacular version of the *Bhagavat Purana*. The inspiration, undoubtedly, came from the *Purana*, but *Sursagar* is undeniably lyrical in core and very creatively Surdas’. In the existing stories and structure of *Bhagavat*, Surdas dwelled and concentrated on Krishna lila. He glossed over many stories and completely ignored some. He also added the love games of alms giving (*dān lila*) and Radha’s pique (*mān lila*) and elaborated upon existing bee songs (*Bhramar-Geet*). In *Bhagavat*, there is just a reference to the bee songs, but Surdas poured his poetic and creative sensibility into *Bhramar Geet* so much so that it shines in *Sursagar* as a jewel and is an unparalleled example of the poetry of separation (*viraha*) in Hindi.

The subject matter i.e. the lilas of Krishna, is more or less the same in all his three works i.e. *Sursagar*, *Sursaravali* and *Sahitya Lahari*, only the emphasis is different. To illuminate and sing the various child and love games of Krishna in a loosely structured form is the poet’s basic preoccupation in *Sursagar*. There is a very thin story line. At many places he completely abandons the story and concentrates on different aspects of the same action or emotion, e.g. Krishna’s beauty or his childhood pranks or the women of Braj in love. In such poems his style is simple, direct and lyrical. Where he picks up a story line, the poems become longer, descriptive and lack the intensity of the shorter poems. There is very little philosophical or sectarian element in *Sursagar*. *Sursaravali* addresses itself to the philosophical aspects of his reli-

gious and pushti beliefs, and complements *Sursagar*. In many manuscripts *Sursaravali* is found as an introduction to *Sursagar*.

*Sahitya Lahari* is a small volume by comparison and contains 118 padas. Some manuscripts contain these poems at the end of *Sursagar*. Surdas is primarily concerned with the poetic beauty and his ability to dazzle and puzzle the audience in these padas. One has to be well versed in Indian theories of literature, poetics, religious and mythological allusions to grasp the meaning. Though the padas are about Krishna and Radha, nothing new is introduced as far as subject matter is concerned. The songs illustrate and elaborate different figures of speeches and different aspects of love and maturity in women.

Surdas' range of subject matter is limited, especially when compared to poets like Tulsidas, or a sufi like Malik Muhammad Jayasi. He did not include all aspects of Krishna's incarnation, neither as the king of Dwarika or the hero of the *Bhagavat Gita*. He only concentrated upon Krishna as a child, as the loved one of people of Braj and as the divine saviour of his devotees. This idea was compatible and in accordance to pushtimarg where the worship of child and lover Krishna is emphasized.

Within his restricted range of subject matter, Surdas has gone to such depths and minute details that he reigns supreme.

Starting from the birth of Krishna, he sings over and over about the activities in Braj, the hustle and bustle, the alms giving, the singing, dancing and merry making. As Krishna grows up, Surdas continues with the descriptions of his enormous beauty, his learning to crawl, the appearance of baby teeth, Yashoda's many activities as a mother, her teaching him waly. While all this action is going on a human, personal level, Krishna in his divine form, effortlessly kills demonesses like Putana and demons like Trinavart and Bakasur. Yashoda and other people are mystified. Never do they suspect anything divine. But Surdas constantly remembers and reminds his listeners that Krishna is divine and all that is human is just his lila—a game. That is why the last lines of his songs almost always conclude with reference to Krishna as Surdas' Lord and Master. Other such reminders are also interspersed in *Sursagar*.

“whose forms and qualities are fathomless,  
that one, Yasoda takes in her lap and rocks.  
He, who, from different forms of worship.  
recitation, meditation and discipline  
cannot be grasped,  
plays in Nanda’s courtyard.

...

He, who creates the universe  
protects and destroys it,  
that one plays games with the cowherds. . . .”

A little older, Krishna subjugates Kaliya the serpent, protects the people of Braj from wrath of Indra. These acts occur concurrently while he is stealing churned milk foam, breaking the pots and distributing the curds among his friends. When caught red handed by milkgirls, he assumes an innocent expression and manages to convince his mother that everyone is after him—he is so little, isn’t he; and his arms so tiny, how could he reach the pot hung from the ceiling?

O mother mine,  
I didn’t eat the curds.  
Early in the morning you sent me  
to the forest, after the cows.  
For hours I wandered behind them,  
In the evening I came home.  
It is my friends, the other cowherds,  
who smeared my face with butter.  
Besides, I am a child,  
with such small arms,  
how can I reach the pot,  
hung so high?  
Throwing down the stick, then,  
Yasoda picked up her son,  
And hugged him.  
Surdas says, seeing the joy of Jasumati  
Shiva and Brahma  
Became crazy with envy.

Yashoda believing him, scolds the women who blame her son. When Krishna is older, he is sent out with other boys to graze the cows. Yashoda's anger just boils over when she finds out that her beloved son is sent to chase after the cows while other boys relax and tease him. She is the supreme example of a doting mother. She makes the food Krishna likes to eat, she cajols him when he runs away at bath time, she puts up with his every whim.

Poem after poem in *Sursagar* records the childhood games of Krishna, which bring infinite joy to Nanda, Yashoda, Krishna's friends and the women of Braj. The women of Braj have come to love Krishna with different attitudes. Older women love him as a child, but the young women and girls cannot keep themselves away from him. Apparently to Yashoda, he is still a child, but not to other girls. They are irresistibly drawn to him and wait impatiently to see him, to meet him in the pastoral surroundings, where the river Yamuna flows and the flowering creepers encircle strong trees, the birds sing, the peacocks strut, having had their feathers worn in a crown by Krishna. Many meetings take place in the thick, shady groves. On a full moon night Krishna plays on his flute and holds the circular dance, the *rāsa*, with the gopis.

It is in this beautiful surrounding that love grows between Krishna and Radha and other gopis. Surdas' portrayal of *vat-salva bhava* in 700 *padas* is only paralleled by his songs of love. Once again, he goes into the very depths of this emotion and describes very minutely every aspect and mood of love between Krishna and Radha. Jayadeva's Radha in *Gita Govinda* is already mature and is cross with Krishna because of his unfaithfulness to her. But Surdas' Krishna met Radha when they were both children. He went out to play in the lanes of Braj and his eyes fell upon a very fair girl, in blue clothes, a vermilion mark on her forehead, and a long braid rippling on her back. She was proud and distant, but Surdas' Lord beguiled her with his clever talk.

Who are you  
O Fair One?  
Shyam asks.

Where do you live?  
 Whose daughter are you?  
 I've never seen you in the lanes of Braj.  
 Why should I come to Braj?  
 I play in my own courtyard.  
 But I do keep hearing  
 about Nanda's son who steals butter and curds.  
 What can I steal from you, O Fair one?  
 Come, let's get together and play.  
 Sur's Lord is the crown-gem amongst the lovers  
 He beguiled innocent Radhika by his clever talk.

They begin to play together, Radha finds excuses to visit Krishna. She is scolded both by her mother and Yashoda for always hanging around Krishna. Krishna begs her to come and see him because there is no peace in his heart until he sees her. Surdas continues this sweet, innocent childhood love, till one day, in the forest, amidst storm and rain, they both discover their feelings have changed. From then on, Surdas talks of erotic love between them, its joy, its glow, and its misunderstandings. Radha is easily hurt and piqued. They both suffer and the messengers run to and fro. In the end, Krishna falls upon Radha's feet and only then could she be appeased.

The second part of the tenth chapter in *Sursagar* contains little else except loves of Krishna, for he is the supreme god, and all the women are human souls yearning for total oneness with him. There are about 2105 poems of joyous love in *Sursagar*.

Since many young women of Braj were married to other cowherds, their love for Krishna expressed the *parakiya* (someone else's wife) bhava, and thus was more poignant. Surdas described both *svakiya* (one's own wife or beloved) and *parakiya* love, its intensity and agony. For example

At the door of Nanda,  
 She asks for Nanda's house  
 From this way, she goes, that way  
 from there she returns here again.  
 She is dying to come close to him  
 to see the son of Nanda.

The girl of Braj is terribly anxious  
 She has dedicated to him  
 her body, heart, and everything.  
 She has given to him all.  
 Abandoning her honour  
 giving up her modesty  
 she adores Shyam.  
 She has now no fear.  
 She even forgets how to call out and sell her curds,  
 She says, buy my Shyam—my Shyam  
 She does not remember that she has a home to return to.  
 Sur says, when she meets her Lord,  
 The agitation turns to joy;  
 Under his body  
 She becomes one with him, like yellow turmeric mixed  
 with lime.

The total oneness of Krishna and his beloved Radha has  
 been described by Surdas as

Only after embracing and holding her close to his heart  
 He let his beloved go home.  
 He caressed her face.  
 Immersed with love  
 Held her tightly again and again.  
 It is one body.  
 It is half Radha, half Hari.  
 They have been born as two in Braj.  
 Sursyam says,  
 Their every limb is filled with this desire,  
 and their love spills over.  
 The husband of Rati, Kama. is afraid  
 Seeing their beauty and glow.

The grief and sorrow enter when Krishna goes to Mathura  
 and leaves Braj behind. Krishna's going away is not an abandon-  
 ment, it is in accordance with his role for which he had taken  
 an incarnation. It is also another form of lila that Surdas has  
 chosen to describe. And that is for the welfare of the world,.

the extinction of evil and restoration of the balance, for Vishnu is the preserver of this universe. This period, for Krishna and the gopis, marks the end of his madhur lila, the games of childhood and love. The gopis are so much stricken by the pain of separation that they do not take a larger view of Krishna's role in life. Here they become simple village women, unaware of the large context, and very deeply preoccupied by their own loss. Surdas has devoted over eleven hundred poems to describe this state of separation, and once again, with his finely attuned sensitivity and his skill as a poet, he has laid bare every emotion that a human soul in this situation can become an heir to. The desire of being together, anxiety at the separation, constantly speaking of the lover's qualities, remembering him, swelling up of feelings, deliriousness, sickness, numbness, fainting, insanity and death are portrayed with deftness, acute perception and compassion. Surdas, with his creative innovation, elaborated a whole portion in the story of *Sursagar*, which is called the Bee Songs (*Bhramar Geet*), and these 400 songs mainly describe the love of gopis for Krishna and their mental distress.

'Bhramar' literally means a large black bee, Surdas uses it in various context and meanings. First of all, it is a metaphor for Krishna, because of the similarity in color and nature. Just as a bee flits from one flower to another, tasting the honey here and there, from gopis point of view, Krishna has done the same. The word has also been used for Uddhava, friend of Krishna and his messenger. It conveys, in these poems, meanings like the husband, lover, a promiscuous man, a deranged person, a trickster.

The poems in *Bhramar Geet* in *Sursagar* have been inspired by an anecdote in *Bhagvat*. Uddhava, a friend and companion of Krishna in Mathura was a firm believer in the way of gyana (knowledge) and a follower of yoga principles. He was amused at seeing Krishna, the powerful king of Mathura, becoming misty eyed at the memory of his beloved Brindavan, his foster mother Yashoda, and his companions and lovers, gopis. So Krishna sent him to Brindavan, to teach him a lesson indirectly and to impress upon him that the way of love was superior to that of knowledge. While in *Bhagvat* the people of Brindavan found peace and comfort in Uddhava's teachings, in *Sursagar* Uddhava was first given the cordial welcome and warm hospi-



talities, but when he started telling the gopis to forget Krishna and worship the attributeless Brahman, he incurred their severe wrath. He was insulted, mocked, taunted and yet the deep love of gopis was also revealed to him. He came back utterly convinced in the way of love.

Surdas' multilevel use of these bee songs is very clever. On the level of propounding his religious beliefs, he emphatically established that the way of love and devotion is higher than the dry, intellectual way of grasping the nature of Brahman; secondly, it gave him an unlimited opportunity for detailed and minute portrayal of love and separation. Lastly, Surdas' genius as a poet also found its fullest expression in these poems. These songs gave him occasions to use many 'ornamentations' (*alankars*), like similes, metaphors, allegories, pathetic fallacy, hyperbole, satire, alliterations and clever puns.

The main mood (*rāsa*) of *Bhramar Geet* is, of course erotic (*srīngar*) and what is known in Hindi as *vipralambh* (separation of the lovers).

Even in traditional themes, Surdas brought his own creative sensitivity. The poems of entreaty are such examples. Each devotee poet has composed such poems, because they form a very important part of the overall emotion of bhakti. The major mood is that of servitude (*dasya*) and the devotee declares his total dedication to his special deity. The convention called that the poet describe himself in the lowliest of terms, because then in favoring him God reveals his greatness and compassion. Surdas, according to the *Varta*, sang nothing but the poems of supplication and entreaty before his meeting with Vallabha-charya. He called himself names like 'the crown of all sinners', 'the leader of the sinners' and attributed to himself characteristics like greed, attachment, anger, lust, unreligiousness, cruelty, injustice, compulsive stealing, unfaithfulness, crookedness, lack of discretion, miserliness, ingratitude, lowliness, pride, laziness, overeating, cowardice. In one single poem he enumerated eighty-nine shortcomings and finished the poem

I have many, many other faults  
O Lord,  
I've mentioned just a few.

Surdas has saved the poem from being just a plain list of faults, by using poetic expressions, directness and by selecting the right words.

He has also written simple and effective poems of entreaty—

I worship the lotus feet of my Lord Hari  
Whose grace can make the cripple climb the mountains  
Everything can be seen by the blind.  
The deaf hears, the mute speaks again,  
The pauper struts under a king's umbrella  
Surdas' Lord is all compassion  
Again and again he prays to his feet.

Apart from the songs of entreaty, childhood, love and separation, Surdas has written songs of ceremonies, celebrations, and of seasons. The songs of ceremonies mainly describe the rituals connected with growing up of a male child in Indian society, especially in Braj area. They include the cutting of umbilical cord by the midwife, the gathering of people and happiness at a baby's birth, casting of horoscope, first feeding of solid food, ear piercing etc. Later on, at the occasion of secret marriage of Krishna and Radha, her friends perform the wedding ceremonies. Surdas has created songs which have a strong folk element. One of the important part of wedding is *jyonar*, the main feast. While the marriage party is dining, the women of the bride's household describe the bridal feast in songs. The name of the dishes; how they have been prepared, whether they are sweet or salty, vegetables or fried breads are mentioned. The details in songs like this bring out Surdas' amazing familiarity with rites and rituals as well as foods served on festive occasions.

The seasonal songs are mostly *Holi* and *jhoola*, the poet has kept the echoes of folksongs sung at *Holi* in Braj area while the *jhoola* poems are more literary.

Though most of his poems seem simple and direct, they are studded with word ornamentation (*shabdalanekar*), and his musical ear naturally selected pleasant and sweet sounding arrangement of words. The alliteration and onomatopoeia are the most obvious; yet there is always a deeper shade of meaning

in his poems. Surdas created different effects, sweetness, quietness or the rushing of a storm by his word choices, e.g. Yasoda rocking Krishna to sleep, he uses words,

*halraway dulrai, malhawah  
joi-soi-kachhu gaway.*

The sounds merge with each other, in three different patterns, three l's in first three words, *way* repeated twice in the first line and the last syllable of the second line, and *i*, in *dulrai*, *joi*, *soi*; and onomatopoeia in *joi-soi*. Describing a forest fire, he says

*Bhaharat, Jhaharat, davanal ayo.*

.....  
*Jhapati, jhatpat lapat, phool phal chat chataki  
phatat lat lataki drum drum nawayo...*

thus, using more harsh sounding words like 'jha', 'h', 'bha' and lots of 't's. The effect does not cease with sounds only, reading this poem in Hindi, many images are evoked, the falling of trees as they burn, the confusion, the noises, and the crackle of fire. The images also bring an inner rhythm and an impression of vigorous movement.

Out of prevalent rhetorical devices, Surdas has used many, to enhance his poetry, e.g. the *dhvanis* which are an important part of Sanskrit poetics.

"The idea of *dhvani*, in Sanskrit poetics, is that several expressed parts of a poem, reveal the unexpressed deeper sense, which is something singular and different from the denotative and indicative elements both in order and in essence and which is termed the *dhvani* (lit. 'sound', 'echo', 'tone') or *vyanga artha* (suggested sense) in poetry."<sup>14</sup>

In his simple, direct descriptive poems, he has made copious use of *abhidha* (denotation). On other occasions where the poetic transference occurs good use of *lakshana* (or indication) is made. For instance instead of talking about their own yearning and hunger for Krishna, their own sadness, the gopis talk about their eyes, which hunger and thirst for Krishna.<sup>15</sup> The device is used very often in *Bhramar Geet*, where the entire conversation

between Uddhava and the gopis takes place. Addressing all their feelings to a bee which came flying when Uddhava was telling that they should forget Krishna, is in itself a good use of *lakshana*. Instead of addressing Uddhava directly, or Krishna, the bee becomes the symbol, and of many feelings, love, despair, irony and sarcasm. The poems, so obviously addressed to the bee, are mainly directed to Uddhava.

O dull and dry bee!  
Only the one with a heart can know the sweetness  
(of love).

The frog spends his whole life in water  
where the lotus blooms  
but he is ignorant of its fragrance.

Every one is  
for oneself,  
O nectar drinking bee;  
be silent!  
We've seen you  
and we know him well too.

or

Let, it be O drunken bee,  
let it be.

The preaching of Uddhava are dull and dry, for he is asking the gopis to forget Krishna and to follow the path of Nirgun devotion. Krishna evokes the love, the fond memories, desires and yet he has proven to be unfaithful. In both the quotes, with the use of adjective 'drunk' or 'nectar drinking,' much more is being expressed by the poet than is apparent at the surface level.

Suggested meanings have been used in the poetry of sexual union. The poet saves it from being graphically explicit by use of words and symbols which suggest the consummation of love and the flow of erotic feelings.

Irony and sarcasm is an integral part of *Vyanjana* or suggestion. The intense jealousy and wrath of gopis spill over when they learn that their beloved Krishna is in love with and is

absolutely won over by a hunchbacked maidservant in Mathura,

Oh, that hunchback worked so right.  
Bee, hearing this tidings  
our burning hearts  
find great relief.  
Hari, who stole  
from us,  
all that we had.  
That One, didn't know  
when he was vanquished.  
Now he is  
the laughing stock  
all around.  
Sur says, that hunchback offered a bit of sandal paste  
and conquered the Lord of Braj.  
A maidservant defeated  
at cleverness  
all clever women.

The above poem illustrates Surdas' use of 'sound' and 'tone' system. The gopis, so obviously are praising the hunchback, who won Krishna's heart. But there are at least two unexpressed levels of meaning. One is, that the gopis offered everything to Krishna—their youth, beauty, good names, this life and all lives to come—and he took it all and went away, leaving them with nothing but memories. The regret of having given all and not getting him, and that one being taken by a woman, low born, ugly and only by a humble offering of sandal paste, rings in these lines. The other meaning is, that the gopis are not happy at all, they burn even more, with jealousy and rage when they hear that they have been abandoned for an ugly maidservant who is now Krishna's new love. While the poem is written in a simple, direct manner, using a straightforward style, the indicative and suggestive meanings, no doubt add a great deal more to it.

Surdas' poems are striking for their visual imagery. The similes, metaphors abound. He has used many traditional expressions e.g. lotus, cloud, bee to describe Krishna's beauty and also the

traditional lovers; cloud and the peacock, chakor bird and the moon, the moth and the fire, the chakwa birds who are compelled to fly at different directions at sunset, the night lily and the moon, the lotus and the sun. However, these do not sound stale or hackneyed in Surdas' poetry because the poems are imbued with genuine feelings. He has not stopped just with these comparisons, no doubt the legacy of earlier and continuing poetic tradition, but has added to them enormously by his own poetic inventiveness.

He uses brilliant colors and the contrasts of light and shades as would a painter. The colors of the skirts and women's saris, their jewelry, hair style, the flowers and nature, are cleverly used and bring a richness to his language and poetry. Surdas is never tired of describing Krishna and Radha together; the dark and the fair one, he in his yellow scarf, she in her blue clothes, like rain cloud and the lightening and in many other similar images.

It has been noted earlier that Surdas was an accomplished musician, and it was this talent that was mostly responsible for his appointment as *kirtaniya* at Srinath temple. Surdas used at least 79 Indian *ragas* and *raginis*.<sup>16</sup> He is attributed to have created *Sur's Malhar* and *Sur Sarang*. Since the system of daily worship at the temple was elaborate and required specific contents in songs at specific times, Surdas' poems are set accordingly. His musical talent brought truly lyrical quality to his poetry. The words, images, sounds, colors, all blend harmoniously, evoking exactly the mood Surdas must have tried to create.

The singer had to capture the audience attention from the first line of the song. Surdas used this technique in a very striking way and to his best advantage. The opening line, usually sets the central idea, the mood and the tone of the poem; the following lines either reinforce, or elaborate upon it. This is done either by introducing new images, or simply carrying on the story idea set in the beginning. After each new line is sung, the musician comes back to the refrain, thus reinforcing the primary idea set in the opening line. The sweetness of raga, the dominant emotion and the imagery add to the depth and the texture of the poem. This device has also helped the song maintain its unity of thought and its culmination and full flowering in the last two lines, e.g.

Nobody ever became happy  
 loving.  
 The moth loved the fire,  
 it burnt itself.  
 Nobody ever became happy  
 loving.  
 The bee loved the lotus,  
 the petals became his prison.  
 Nobody ever became happy  
 loving.  
 The deer drawn by the sweet sound  
 had to bear the arrow in his heart.  
 Nobody ever became happy  
 loving.  
 We, who loved the Honeyed One  
 were struck dumb when he was leaving.  
 Nobody ever became happy  
 loving.  
 O Surdas, without our lord we suffer,  
 our tears are always streaming.  
 Nobody ever became happy  
 loving.

Surdas' language is Braj bhasha at its sweetest and most expressive. He has an inexhaustible storehouse of expressions and vocabulary. He has enriched his poetic language by taking words from all sources, Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian and regional languages like Awadhi and Bundelkhadi. The beauty of his language also lies in his ability to take folk or colloquial words and incorporating them into literary medium. He has also used many prevalent idioms, phrases and proverbs with great effectiveness. His enormous knowledge of life, lifestyles, nature, animals, human sports, all added dimensions to his poetry.

The enormous range of Surdas' language is nowhere more evident than in his purely descriptive poems. In a poem of supplication mentioned earlier he has used fifty-nine words to point out his faults, without any repetition. The credit to raise Braj bhasha from a regional language to the language of literature and of the poetry of Krishna cult in Hindi undoubtedly goes to Surdas.





## NOTES

1. There is a pun on the word 'sur' which in Hindi could mean: a warrior or a courageous man as well as an intense pain.

2. Excerpted from Ram Ratan Bhatnagar, *Sur Sahitya Ki Bhoomika* (Allahabad: Ram Narainbal and Beni Madhava, 1964), pp. 33-34.

3. Dwarkadas Parikh and Prabhu Dayal Meetal *Sur Nirṇaya* (Mathura: Sahitya Sansthan, 1962), p. 55.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

5. Ram Chandra Shukla, *Hindi Sahitya Ka Itihas* (Kashi : Nagri Pracharini Sabha, samvat 2025), p. 157.

6. For detailed discussions, see Din Dayal Gupta, *Ashtachhap aur Vallabha Sampradaya* (Prayag : Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, 1970); Parikh and Meetal, *Sur Nirṇaya*; S.M. Pandey and Norman Zide, *The Poems of Surdas* (University of Chicago, 1963).

7. Grierson, George Abraham, *The Modern Vernacular Literature of Hindustan*, trans. Krishan Lal Gupta (Varanasi Hindi Pracharak Pustakalaya, 1961), p. 103.

8. Brajeshwar Varma, *Surdas* (New Delhi : National Book Trust, 1969), pp. 12-13.

9. Barbara Steller Miller, *Love Songs of the Dark Lord* (Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 7.

10. Deben Bhattacharya, *Love Songs of Vidyapati* (Delhi : Orient Paperbacks), p. 23.

11. For detailed discussion of these ideas and bhakti, see Franklin Edgerton, *The Bhagvad Gita* (Harvard University Press, Mass., 1944), pp. 172-178.

12. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. II (Macmillan, New York, 1927), p. 750.

13. Munshi Ram Sharma, *Bharatiya Sadhna aur Sursahitya* (Kanpur : Bharatvarsh Press, samvat 1999), p. 123 : and Din

Dayal Gupta, *Ashtachhap aur Vallabha Sampradaya*, pp. 568-569.

14. S. K. De, *Sanskrit Poetics* (Calcutta : K. L. Mukhopadhyaya, 1960), p. 143.

15. Manmohan Gautam, *Sur Ki Kavyakala* (Delhi : Bhartiya Sahitya Mandir), p. 121.

16. Usha Gupta, *Hindi Ke Krishna Bhakti Kalin Sahitya Men Sangeet* (Lucknow, Lucknow University, samvat 2016), p. 227.

## POEMS



1

O mother mine,  
I didn't eat the curds.  
Early in the morning you sent me  
to the forest, after the cows.  
For hours I wandered behind them,  
In the evening I came home.  
It is my friends, the other cowherds,  
who smeared my face with butter.  
Besides, I am a child,  
with such small arms,  
how can I reach the pot,  
hung so high ?  
Throwing down the stick, then,  
Yasoda picked up her son,  
And hugged him.

Surdas says, seeing the joy of Jasumati  
Shiva and Brahma become  
crazy with envy.

‘मैया पोरि मैं नहि माखन खायो’

सू. सा. 952

## 2

Mother, big brother Daau  
teases me a lot.  
He tells me that I've been bought.  
When did you, Jasumati, give birth  
to me ?  
I tell you, because of this  
I don't go out to play.  
Again and again, he pesters me  
and asks,  
Who is your father, and who  
your mother ?  
Why are you, Krishna  
so dark, when  
Nanda and Yasoda  
are both so fair.  
All the cowherds snap their fingers  
and clap, mocking me.  
And Balbir coaches them  
to say so.  
You only punish me, Mother!  
never do you chastise him.  
Jasumati enjoys  
the anger of Mohan,  
deriving great pleasure  
looking at him  
O Kanha, listen, your big brother  
Balbhadra,  
talks a lot of nonsense  
he has been a crook  
from the very birth.

**POEMS:-**

**O Shyam of Surdas,  
I swear by all the cattle  
I am your mother  
and you my son.**

**‘भैया मोहि दाऊ बहुत खिजायौ’  
सू. सा. 833**

3

The talk is going around  
 from house to house  
 in Braj.  
 The Son of Nanda, along with his friends,  
 steals and eats the butter.  
 One woman says, 'he just entered my house.'  
 Another says, 'seeing me at the entrance  
 he ran away.'  
 Someone else wishes, how could it be arranged  
 that I see Hari in my house,  
 I shall bring out the butter and say  
 'Eat as much as you want, O Dark One!'  
 If I see him, I shall hold him  
 tight to my heart, thinks another one.  
 I shall tie up, and keep him always  
 Nobody shall be able to get him away from me.  
 Folding her hands, she prays.

Sur says, in order to see the Lord,  
 the women of Braj are thinking  
 many clever schemes.

'बली ब्रज घर घरनि यह बात'

सू. सा. 891



Jasumati is coaxing Kanha  
 by saying,  
 O Shyam, listen, you are  
 now not a child,  
 give up the breast feeding  
 the other boys of Braj  
 shall laugh at you  
 if they find you  
 still suckling.  
 Won't you be  
 ashamed ?  
 Besides, your beautiful teeth  
 shall grow crooked,  
 listen, O son!  
 Come, leave it from today;  
 do what I tell you,  
 though you may not like it.  
 Shyam, hearing this, shyly  
 smiled, and hid his face  
 in her anchal.

Surdas sings joyfully.

‘जसुमति कान्हूहि यही सिखावति’

सू. सा. 840

## 5

Mother Jasoda is teaching  
 him, how to walk.  
 Stumbling, in a panic, he extends  
 his hand.  
 Wavering, he puts his foot  
 on the floor.  
 She holds him tightly,  
 looking at his beautiful face.  
 Sometimes she calls out to Bala,  
 'You brothers! both  
 come and play in the courtyard.'  
 Often she makes a wish  
 to the House Deity,  
 that her child Kanhaiya may  
 live for a long time.

Surdas's Lord is Giver of all Joys,  
 chief Nanda's son  
 has great renown and powers.

'सिखवति चलन जसोदा मैया'

सू. सा. 732

O, if only I could  
in some ways, somehow  
control the ways of Brahma: the writer of fates.  
Then, O friend, I shall fulfil  
your wish, which is also mine.  
I shall ask him  
to turn every pore  
into eyes.  
And ones that always  
remains open,  
never blink.

What can I do ? Shyam is such a  
treasure house of beauty.  
Two eyes are not enough.

‘जों दिवना अपबस करि पाऊं’

सू. सा. 2465

My addiction is this.  
 O friend!  
 I don't know anyone else  
 other than my Cow-  
 Protecting Gopal.  
 How can I throw away,  
 my priceless diamond  
 to collect  
 glass beads?  
 If you have a tiny drop  
 of immortalising Amrit,  
 the mountain of poison  
 is of no effect.  
 To my heart, my words  
 and to my body  
 No one else is attractive.  
 My Shyam has brought me  
 enormous richness.

For my Lord, I have  
 given up all;  
 even my caste.  
 So says Surdas.

‘देखो माधव की मित्राई’

सू. सा. 3805

Jasumati wishes in her heart.  
 When would my precious son  
 start to crawl,  
 When would he put  
 a foot on the floor.  
 When would the speech  
 flow from his lips?  
 Calling Nanda, 'Father' and 'me, 'Mother',  
 Grabbing my sari, saying this and that  
 would he quarrel with me?  
 How long would he keep eating  
 so little, instead of putting  
 food in his mouth,  
 by himself?  
 When would he talk to,  
 smiling; that vision  
 shall take away all the sorrows.  
 Leaving Shyam, alone in the  
 courtyard, she went in  
 for some work.  
 In the meantime a great thunder-cloud  
 rose in the sky.  
 Surdas says, the people of Braj  
 hearing the roar,  
 were greatly frightened,  
 and stood still wherever they were.

‘जसुमति मन अभिलाष करै’

सू. सा. 694

9

I've heard something new.  
A son is born to  
Mahari Jasoda,  
Good wishes flow from  
every house.  
At her place a crowd of  
gopas and gopis has gathered  
I cannot describe the splendour.  
The entire land of Gokul  
is celebrating,

The precious stones are strewn on earth.  
Old men, children and youths  
dance merrily.  
Pools of milk have collected in the streets.

Surdas' Lord is the Ocean of all Happiness  
Beautiful and dark is Krishna.

‘हैं इक नई बात सुनि आई’  
सू. सा. 639

10

I was coming from the river  
 carrying the water.  
 My eyes fell upon  
 a child, dark of colour.  
 I forgot to go home  
 when I saw his beautiful face  
 He glanced at me.  
 I stared at him, from that moment on,  
 I've been sold to him.  
 My heart pounds.  
 My eyes stare  
 My body is greatly agitated;  
 I am speechless  
 The Charmer asked,  
 'Who are you? I don't remember seeing you  
 in Braj?'

Meeting Surdas' Lord, Mohan  
 the gopi is a drop lost in the vast ocean.

'हम तो बुढ़ भाँति फल पायी'  
 सू. सा. 4435

## 11

O friend, I saw the son of Jasuda,  
 the little one, playing in the courtyard.  
 That instant, my whole life changed,  
 my body and mind got steeped in his dark colour.  
 His vision went deep into my heart and soul,  
 I took him in through the pupils of my eyes.  
 Since then, O friend,  
 I get this frequent feeling  
 that bright lights shimmer all around me.

Am I he, or is he me?  
 I don't know, I cannot cope.  
 Is the tree in the seed,  
 or the seed in the tree?  
 Can one be separated from the other?  
 Oceans-earth-sky-groves and houses  
 as far as my eyes can see,  
 Here, there, everywhere  
 Always before me  
 dances the beloved son of Nanda.  
 I abandon my modesty.  
 Give up the world, family honor, my husband  
 elders, mother and father.  
 I uncover my face and my head,  
 though once I wouldn't cross the  
 threshold.  
 Spells, magic, charms and amulets,  
 worshipping at the Deva's doors has been done for me.



## POEMS

Mother-in-law and sister-in-law  
take me from house to house  
to have my sickness diagnosed  
What can I say,  
how can I describe ?  
Once you know this pleasure  
All else is tasteless.

So says greedy Surdas.

‘मैं देख्यो जसुदा को नंदन’

सू. सा. 753

12

O mother, I really love the butter.

Don't try to force fruits and good food  
upon me.

I don't like it.

A gopi, standing nearby,  
heard this conversation,  
and wished in her heart.

Would I ever see him stealing  
butter from my house?

If he ever came and went to  
the butter churner.

I shall hide myself and feast my eyes.

Surdas' Lord is omniscient;  
he divined her heartfelt wish.

'मैया री मोहि माखन भावै'

सू. सा. 882

Shyam went to the house of  
 a milkmaid.  
 No one was at the door,  
 looking all around,  
 he went in.  
 Seeing Hari come,  
 she hid herself from him.  
 In the lonely house, near the butter churner  
 he sat.  
 He found the pot filled with cream  
 and butter.  
 He took some.  
 In the gem studded pillar  
 he saw his own reflection  
 and was filled with childlike wonder.  
 I have come here for the first time  
 to steal butter  
 and what a nice companion I've found.  
 He ate some himself, offered some  
 to his reflection, saying—  
 if you want, I shall give you  
 the whole pot.  
 Why do you throw it around—  
 isn't it delicious?  
 I would like to give you more—  
 Why are you so thoughtful?  
 The young woman of Braj  
 became filled with happiness  
 listening to Shyam's prattle.

**Surdas' Lord: Foe of demon Mura,  
seeing a glimpse of the gopi,  
ran away.**

**‘स्याम गये तिहि ग्वालनि के घर’**

**सू. सा. 883**

The friends tease Krishna,  
when he gets upset, playing.  
Why didn't you run, why  
did you remain standing?  
When you lose, why  
do you get angry?  
In the midst, Haldhar spoke,  
he has no mother, no father.  
He doesn't know how to win,  
how to lose.  
He blames the other boys  
whenever he loses, by his own  
default, he starts to fight.  
who sent him here  
to play with us?

Surdas says, then Shyam  
began to cry and went  
to ask the Mother,  
the truth, about himself.

‘सखा कहत हैं स्याम रिसाने’

सू. सा. 832

## 15

She caught Kanha  
 right in the middle of stealing.  
 Now I've got you Hari  
 in my hands, you've  
 teased me day and night.  
 You ate up all my curds and butter  
 and have done a lot of mischief.  
 Now you are in my grip;  
 I know your tricks  
 very well.  
 Where will you go now?  
 Shall I get you some more butter  
 She taunts, holding him by both arms.  
 I swear by you, I didn't even  
 taste a drop, my friends ate it all.  
 Looking at her face, he smiled,  
 All her anger died down.  
 The milkmaid clasped Hari to her heart.

‘चोरी करत कान्हू धरि पाय’

सू. ता. 915

Who are you  
O Fair One?  
Shyam asks.  
Where do you live  
Whose daughter are you?  
I've never seen you in the lanes of Braj.  
Why should I come to Braj?  
I play in my own courtyard.  
But I do keep hearing  
about Nanda's son who steals butter and curds.  
What can I steal from you, O Fair one?  
Come, let's get together and play.

Sur's Lord is the crown-gem amongst the lovers  
He beguiled innocent Radhika by his clever talk.

‘ब्रह्मत स्याम कौन तू गोरी’

सू. ता. 1291

17

The growing girl,  
 sitting in the house surrounded by groves  
 is deeply bewildered  
 and stirred.  
 In her heart  
 the dark image of the god of love  
 has emerged.  
 Often she lifts her bodice  
 and look at the  
 budding breasts.  
 He sees their reflection  
 in gem studded walls,  
 he has no need to wear  
 any ornament,  
 for the breasts are  
 those themselves.

Surdas says, this is the description  
 a girl becoming  
 aware of her onsetting youth.

‘आज अकेली कुंज भवन में’  
 साहित्य लहरी 3



The young, adolescent girl (Radha)  
looks for you, again and again,  
Hundred thoughts rush in her heart,  
when she sees the clouds gathering.  
She is startled by the  
rustle of a leaf.  
She looks once at the door  
and then at her hardening breasts.  
O son of Nandal why don't you  
go to her right away ?

Surdas says, O Krishna  
Radha is saving many  
reproaches  
for you.

‘फिर फिर उम्रकि झाँकत बाल’

सा. ल. 32

## 19

Delighted Krishna took Radha in his arms  
 Lips sought lips,  
 eyes locked.  
 Heart binding heart,  
 brought great joy.  
 He put his arms around her,  
 with great desire  
 The One-Who-Takes-Away-The-Sorrows-Of-All-The  
 Universe,  
 gave her deep abiding pleasure.  
 The Dark one spoke to her, joyfully,  
 'O beloved!  
 Let us meet again in thick groves.  
 My treasure! go there  
 and I shall come,  
 when you give me a signal.'

Sur says, expressing his desire for her  
 he left,  
 And she went straight to  
 the garden tryst.

‘विहसि राधा कृष्ण अकेली-ही’

सू. ता. 2339

Radha! you are hiding your love  
from me?

'Who is Shyam? Is he dark  
or fair?  
Where does he live?  
Whose son is he?  
Is he old, a young man  
or a little child?'

O friend, look how Radha pretends.  
he is asking me, what Shyam is like?

'सुनहु सबी राधा की बातें'  
सू. सा. 2566

## 21

I've lost the way,  
 which path should I take  
 tell me, O friend!  
 Where has Mohan gone  
 I don't know.  
 I am searching for my love,  
 Eager to meet him.  
 The arrow of love has pierced me,  
 and my dear one found this occasion  
 to forsake me.  
 I wander, seeking him,  
 searching him,  
 in the forests  
 Leaving behind the village  
 and my home.  
 I ask the trees, plead to the creepers  
 nobody utters the name of Krishna  
 I am bewildered, I am looking everywhere  
 I am extremely agitated, alone.  
 If someday I find him,  
 I shall keep him in my eyes.  
 O love, make my heart your dwelling place  
 Live in my eyes!  
 If I meet Surdas' Lord,  
 I shall enjoy the happiness of  
 rāsa: the round dance.

Why do you want to taste me  
O black bee?  
I am puzzled.

I am not that golden jasmine  
where you went for the night,  
having spent the day with me.

Take your saffron fragrant body  
to the night lily.

Your face, your body; all your limbs  
radiate differently with different women.

My devotion causes you nothing  
but chagrin.  
Your separation, for me,  
is like an unsurmountable mountain.

I grow weaker and weaker  
each day. Says urdas.

‘कत तू सुमन सो लपटात’

सरा. स. 70

23

Kissing,  
taking the lover  
taking him in  
for her own gratification.  
She embraces Krishna  
put her arms around his shoulders  
clinging to him.

All the pain goes away,  
no hesitation remains  
in heart or mind.  
She takes him between her breasts  
Gives him her nectar lips  
Puts one hand on her cheek.  
and the other one on her head to support.

Surdas's Lady,  
facing Shyam  
looks at him  
and cannot take  
her eyes off him.

‘कबहुं पिय हरषि हिरदै लगावे’  
सू. सा. 1679

O Radha, you are the beloved of  
the Dark One.  
Krishna is your divine husband,  
and you his woman.  
Hearing this from a girlfriend,  
Love overflowed in Radha's heart.  
Her body trembled, her heart  
rejoiced.  
O, what good fortune!  
She wanted to express her love  
but emotions choked  
her speech.  
The son of Nanda, the King  
of Love, he dwells in her  
eyes. .  
He never leaves her heart,  
She makes him stay there  
always, forever.

Surdas says, O Lord,  
Radha is full of the bliss of love  
it is difficult for her  
to hide her radiance.

‘राधा स्वाम की प्यारी’

सू. सा. 2463

## 25

The fair one, getting early in the morning  
 started out to bathe in Jamuna.  
 Radha came out in the lanes of Braj  
 with her friends.  
 She came to call the friend  
 with whom Shyam had spent the night.  
 Just as she stood at the door  
 Krishna emerged.  
 This sudden meeting  
 startled both.  
 She looked at him,  
 he looked at her  
 both not knowing what to do.  
 Suddenly angry, she swiftly turned back.  
 The friends stood, quietly, looking.  
 Radha's body burnt,  
 she forgot every thing  
 in that anger.

'सखियन संग लै राधिका निकसी ब्रज खोरी'

सू. सा. 3353



Go away !  
 Go back where you spent the night !  
 Why come now,  
 to torture me?  
 Bearing the marks  
 all over the body.  
 your limbs are colored yellow with argaja paste,  
 Your garland is crushed,  
 clothes reek of other's perfume  
 kohl is on your lips,  
 vermilion spots your cheek.  
 your sleepless eyes look red,  
 and the evidence of kisses are on your eyelids.  
 Pick up this mirror  
 and take a look at yourself.

O Surdas's Lord!  
 you must have been embracing  
 some other woman  
 because her bracelets have left  
 deep impressions on your back.

‘तहंइ जाहु जहं रैन बसे हौ’  
 सू. सा. 3120

27

O my friend — !  
 I am wasting away myself  
 loving that son of Nanda,  
 the prince of Braj.  
 It is all so useless.  
 I threw away all the joys, all the pleasures,  
 and endured the arrows of Kama.  
 Even the cool rays of moon  
 burn my body like fire.  
 Still, I see him, his face, his vision  
 in the house, in the courtyard  
 here and there,  
 On the banks of Jamuna.  
 The only desire  
 that is left in me  
 is to give up everything,  
 and specially to renounce my Lord.

O Proud One !  
give up your anger.  
your face, that was bright as the moon  
is now like a faint star.  
who would, O friend,  
deceive you  
intentionally?  
Because of your pique  
Krishna has no rest  
not for a moment.  
You are proud, because you think  
you are more beautiful  
than Kama's wife Rati,  
that Krishna is your husband.  
There are women in Braj  
scheming to take your place.  
O Radha, you don't see the harm  
you are doing to yourself.

Surdas says, clever Krishna  
is now falling at your feet,  
take him and hold him close  
to your heart.

**Radha saw the son of Nanda  
in the lane of Braj,  
surrounded by a crowd.  
She wrote the number five,  
put the crescent moon over it,  
and touched her hand to her heart.**

**Surdas says, Radha  
with her use of subtlety  
and clever brief gesture  
indicated to Shyam,  
that she will wait for him  
at night, after five watches  
have passed.**

30

She looks at the face of her lover.  
His lips are smudged black,  
Sandalpaste on cheeks  
from some other woman.  
She got up quickly,  
took the mirror in hand,  
'Look at yourself, and clean your face'  
Krishna hesitated.  
He saw the kohl, the sandalpaste on his lips and cheeks.  
The Sophisticated, Patient One  
looks at his face  
not uttering a word.

Surshyam is like this.

‘प्यारी चित्तै रहीं मुख पिय को’  
सू. सा. 3100

## 31

In her lonely house  
 Yashoda remembers her son.  
 'Nothing is disturbed  
 by my prince: Kanha.  
 As soon as he got up  
 he grabbed butter from my hand.  
 The young women of Braj,  
 still gather together  
 but nobody brings any  
 complaints to me.'  
 Yashoda's agony is intense.  
 The happiness that reigned  
 once in Braj  
 was not available even to holy men.

Without Surdas's Lord,  
 Braj is not worth a penny.

'मेरे कुंवर कान्हू बिनु'  
 सू. सा. 3798

Tell my message to Devaki.  
I've been just a nursemaid  
for your son, still,  
keep me in favor.  
Even though you may be now know his habits,  
still I repeat.  
Your son Kanha,  
loves the bread and butter  
in the morning.  
He runs away if  
he sights  
oil, paste or warm water.  
Whatever he demanded  
I gave him.  
and only slowly, gradually,  
could he be bathed.  
O traveller, listen, day and night  
I have great worry in my heart,  
Mohan, the apple of my eye,  
must be feeling very bashful.

So sings Surdas.

‘संदेसो देवकी सौ कहियो’  
सू. सा. 3793

## 33

Mother Yashoda, look after yourself.  
 We, both brothers shall return  
 very soon, in just a few days.  
 Since the day I left you,  
 Nobody has called me Kanhaiya,  
 I haven't had kalava in the morning  
 nor have drunk milk straight from the cow.  
 Keep a watchful eye on my flute, mother  
 Don't let Radhika steal any of my toys.  
 And tell father Nanda,  
 Why has he become so indifferent ?

Sur says, having brought Shyam to Mathura,  
 He sent no message.

‘नीके रहियो जसुमति मैया’

सू. सा. 4057



Who is my mother  
 and who is my father?  
 When did you see me being born?  
 I am amused at your prattle.  
 When did I steal the butter and eat it.  
 When did my mother tie me up?  
 Explain to me this,  
 Whose cows do I graze?  
 Whose cows do I milk?  
 You say I am the son of Nanda,  
 Where did Nanda come from?  
 I am Absolute, Unknowable, Indestructible  
 My maya deludes everyone.  
 Listening this all gopis smiled, amused.  
 'Do you really know all these things?  
 O Syam, how can you reject everyone  
 Even your father and your mother?'

‘को माता को पिता हमारे’

सू. सा. 2138

35

O Uddho, no one here understands  
 your preaching of Yoga.  
 We, helpless women, cannot grasp it,  
 besides, we are not widowed.  
 We cannot follow  
 the way of yoga  
 or take a vow of silence.  
 How can we restrain this heart  
 restless as a bird?  
 We wouldn't want to control  
 the intricacies of breathing  
 Having worn the silken clothes  
 who would like the deerskin?  
 Our Guru  
 dances at the fingers of  
 that hunchback.  
 Away from Krishna, who is charming as Kama,  
 we do not understand a thing.

Surdas says,  
 only our Lord can remove our sorrows.

Since his childhood,  
Gopal had this habit,  
I don't know how and where  
he learnt to steal, to deceive.  
When he stole the curds and milk  
I put up with it,  
But now, O friend!  
it is not possible to bear  
the theft of heart,  
my precious diamond.  
O black bee, give my message  
to that Dark One,  
explain to him the rules of kingship.  
Even now, he does not give up,  
his greedy, thieving nature.  
he keeps stealing  
my sanity, my wisdom.

Surdas says,  
Whom to go to complain  
about the faults of my Lord  
For he,  
himself is the king.

37

One day, in the garden, O friend  
 he picked many flowers  
 and gave them to me.  
 I can't get that  
 out of my mind.  
 Then, it began to thunder and rain,  
 I got soaked and cold.  
 When he saw me tremble,  
 he covered me with his yellow shawl.  
 The Ocean of Compassion  
 held me close,  
 What love, what deep attachment  
 it was then,  
 and now, such cruelty.

O friend, Sur's Lord  
 is a warrior and brave.  
 Living in Mathura,  
 he has forgotten  
 he loved me once.

The daughter of Brishbhanu, Radha  
 is extremely dejected.  
 She still wears that same sari  
 which was drenched by the passion  
 of Krishna when he last made love to her.  
 She does not let it be washed  
 holding to it in greed.  
 Her face is always bent low  
 her eyes never look up,  
 she is like a gambler who has lost everything.  
 Her hair is loose and  
 face like a withered night lily,  
 struck by the frost.  
 Hearing the message of Hari (to forget him),  
 all the gopis became like dead.  
 First the separation,  
 then the message from the bee,  
 almost killed them.

Surdas says, it is like dead  
 that they live;  
 the women of Braj,  
 who were once loved by Shyam.

‘वति मलीन वृषभान कुमारी’

सू. सा. 4991

These groves and thickets  
 have become our enemy  
 without Gopal.  
 The same vines and creepers were so shady, so cool  
 then,  
 now they seem afire,  
 The Yamuna flows in vain,  
 the birds sing  
 in vain the lotus bloom,  
 the bees hum.  
 The breeze, water, and camphor  
 were supposed to be cool and life giving  
 now they burn like hot rays of sun.  
 O Uddho, tell Madhava that  
 his separation, like a butcher's knife  
 keeps stabbing us.  
 Life is flowing out.  
 Waiting and waiting  
 looking at the path for Surdas's Lord to come  
 our eyes have turned red like Gunja seeds.

‘बिनु गुपाल बैरिनि भई कुंजै’

सू. तर, 4686

O, my childhood love has gone away.  
 Why doesn't this wretched life  
 leave my body?  
 Why doesn't my heart  
 stop?  
 Brimming with youth,  
 intoxicated by love,  
 I was.  
 I, the culprit, keep churning the curds.  
 Had I known Hari was leaving,  
 I would have rushed out shamelessly  
 and gone along with him.  
 The beautiful woman cries  
 continuously,  
 nothing pleases her,  
 day or night.

Surdas says, to see her Lord again,  
 she gathers her friends  
 to send him letters.

'मेरे मन इतनी सूल रही'  
 सू. सा. 4013

## 41

O dear Uddhol  
 don't be offended.  
 But your city—Mathura, seems to be a room full of black  
 soot,  
 everyone coming from there  
 acquires the same color.  
 You are dark; so was Akrur.  
 The bee is black too.  
 How our lotus-eyed Krishna  
 must be sparkling there!  
 All of you, taken out of a dark blue pitcher,  
 have washed in Jamuna, it seems.  
 That is the reason,  
 the river has also turned deep blue.

Sur says, you dark people  
 are special, indeed!

‘विलगि जनि मानो’

सू. सा. 4151



**One thing pains me,  
pains me very much.  
I keep it carved upon my heart.  
One day, he came to my house,  
when I was churning the curds  
He asked me to love him,  
But I pretended to be proud,  
Hari became angry.  
Radhika, remembering this,  
feels very contrite.  
Fainting, she falls on the floor.**

**Surdas says, her pain is  
unbearable  
at the separation from  
her Lord.**

We caught the fruit both ways.  
 If the union with the Lord of Braj  
 occurs, it is to our liking.  
 If not, the world would sing our praises.  
 For we, of lowly caste,  
 indistinguished cowgirls  
 sit in the same rank as the glorious  
 Lord of goddess Kamala.  
 He, who is unfathomable, invisible  
 to Veadas, and wise men.  
 He came and lived  
 with us gopis.  
 Tell us truly, who achieved  
 the final salvation?  
 Isn't Mukti our servant?  
 We touch your feet, O Uddho!  
 Don't keep repeating the tales of your yoga  
 Anyone who thinks of worshipping other than Krishna  
 Brings endless shame to her mother.

‘हम तो दुहू भाँति फल पायो’

सू. सा. 4434

Our eyes rain continuously,  
day and night  
Since the Dark One has left us,  
the rainy season is always with us.  
The kohl does not stay in the eye,  
our cheeks are always smudged with black.  
Our bodice never has a  
chance to dry  
the stream flows between our breasts.  
Our bodies are  
transformed into tears,  
Surdas's Lord, why have you  
given up the Gokul?

‘निसिदिन बरसत नैन हमारे’

सू. सा. 3854

45

Where does he live,  
 your Nirguna?  
 O Bee; please explain to me,  
 patiently  
 for I swear, I am not joking  
 I really want to know.  
 Who is his father and who the mother?  
 who is his wife?  
 who serves upon him?  
 What is the color of his body  
 What does he wear,  
 What are the things he enjoys?  
 O Bee! if you lied to us,  
 you shall pay yourself for the untruth  
 Hearing this, (Uddhava) was speechless,  
 all his wisdom lost.

So says Surdas.

‘निरगुन कौन देस को वासी’

सू. सा. 4249

The wells of Madhuban forest  
 have filled up with our letters  
 Whoever has gone from here  
 has never returned.  
 Either Shyam bewitched our messengers,  
 or they have perished somewhere.  
 The son of Nanda, let alone writing to us  
 doesn't even reply.  
 The ink ran out  
 the paper melted under our tears  
 the feverish hands  
 burnt the quill.  
 How can we write a letter  
 the eyelid doors  
 have been shut tight.

'संदेसनि मधुवन रूप भरे'  
 वू. ला. 3918

## 47

O wretched forest  
 how is it that you are still green?  
 In the deep agony of separation  
 from beautiful Shyam, why haven't you  
 withered away?  
 Mohan used to play his flute under your shade  
 O tree!  
 leaning against your branches.  
 With that flute he charmed movable and immovable.  
 Sages lost their deep concentration.  
 And you have forgotten those eyes!  
 You flower again and again, shamelessly.  
 Surdas says, in the fierce forest fire  
 of the separation from our Lord  
 why have you not burnt  
 from top to bottom?

‘मधुबन तुम क्यों रहत हरे’

सू. ता. 3828

'Come, meet me O Dark One!  
 the mistake had been mine.'  
 Radha has lost all awareness of  
 her body, her mind.  
 She cries out his name  
 all the time.  
 She calls out, 'Krishna, O Krishna!'  
 A moment seems like a decade  
 Having fallen on the earth,  
 agitated, listless, she moans  
 The stream of tears runs from  
 her eyes.  
 Sometimes she becomes joyous, sometimes she recalls the  
meeting  
 'Take me, O take me,' says the woman  
 burning in separation.  
 The other women of Braj,  
 seeing this state of Radha  
 Stand still, amazed.

## 49

Sita's husband Rama was  
 much better than our Hari.  
 He searched for her,  
 wandering from forests to forest,  
 shrinking the ocean to a hand's span.  
 He killed Ravana, burnt up Lanka.  
 to see the face of the Frightened One.  
 He didn't send, through a messenger  
 the knowledge of Vedas and the Gita  
 to her.  
 How can we trust  
 the lover of a hunchback?  
 He has forgotten all about us,  
 like a drunk, losing all consciousness.  
 He did do a favor though, by sending us  
 the message of yoga, O friend  
 just look at his letter.

Surdas says, how is it possible for one  
 who is greedy for butter  
 to appreciate true love?

'हरि तैं भलो सुपति सीता को'

सू. सा. 4627



Look, look at the love  
 of Madhu's Foe.  
 Like rubbed off golden polish  
 his deception becomes apparent.  
 We thought Hari had  
 our welfare in his heart.  
 The real truth was something else.  
 Completely forgetting the memory of  
 Braj.  
 How cruelly, how heartlessly does he tarry.  
 He is really a milk seller by caste  
 Can he know how to love?  
 The woman, separated from Hari  
 deranged in mind  
 Laments, wringing her hands.

‘देखो माधव की मित्ताई’

सू. सा. 3804-

## 51

O Madhava, I am satiated.  
 You contrived to send me to Braj  
 with your message.  
 Pardon my words.  
 I do entreat you,  
 to hear about gopis' condition  
 The essence of Vedas and Puranas  
 they told me, in easy graspable words.  
 Neither Shruti, nor Shesh, nor Shiva or Creator  
 of the Universe: Brahma,  
 has sung the way as the gopis sang about you.

Sur says, hearing this, Shyam's beautiful eyes  
 overflowed with tears.

'माधो जू मैं अति ही सचु पायो'  
 सू. ला. 4769

Rukmini asks, O Shyam, my husband,  
 who is the daughter of Brishbhannu  
 amongst these women of Braj?  
 Show her to me  
 the love of your childhood.  
 That clever one who,  
 in a very young age,  
 charmed the Charmer.  
 The rosary of her qualities,  
 you're always counted  
 not letting her go  
 from your heart.  
 You keep her memory and her beauty in your mind.  
 'See her, she stands amongst the  
 women of Brindavan  
 in blue clothes, the very fair one.  
 my heart was stolen  
 by her arch glances.'

‘ब्रह्मति है रुकुमिनि पिय इतमें को वृषभानु किसोरी’

सू. सा. 4904

## 53

Meeting took place between Radha and Madhava,  
 Radha and Madhava,  
 Madhava and Radha;  
 the two became one.  
 Madhava soaked in Radha's colour.  
 Radha immersed in Madhava's  
 their love is eternal.  
 The tongue is unable to sing of it.  
 Sweetly smiling, he said  
 'You and I are not two,  
 we are inseparable.'  
 and saying this he sent her back to Braj.

Surdas's Lord of Honey, and Radha  
 play in Braj, every day.  
 Always something new.

‘राधा माधव भेंट भई’

सू. ता. 4910

I worship the lotus feet of Hari, my King,  
whose grace can make the lame climb the mountains  
everything can be seen by the blind.  
The deaf hears, the mute speaks again,  
The pauper struts under a king's umbrella  
The Lord of Surdas is all compassion  
Again and again he prays to his feet.

‘चरण कमल बन्दौ हरि राई’

सू. सा. 1

## 55

O Lord,  
 I am the crown amongst the sinners,  
 The others are just the beginners  
 I have been born a crook.  
 To Ajamil, the hunter, and to the whore  
 even to poison-breasted Putana  
 you granted salvation.  
 You have shown favors to all  
 but me.  
 This hurts.  
 I claim, emphatically, confidently  
 that nobody else  
 is as capable of sinning  
 as I have been.  
 Still amidst the sinners  
 and crooks,

I, Sur, die of shame  
 for not having had  
 your favor.  
 Who else, deserves your grace  
 More than I?

‘प्रभु हौं सब पतितन को दीकी’

सू. सा. 138

56

I am poor  
but the name of Rama  
is my greatest treasure.  
It cannot be stolen from me,  
I cannot lose it, no matter what,  
it is always handy in difficulties.  
Unharmed by the fire,  
unsinkable in water,  
such is the name of Hari.

The Lord of the highest heaven is the provider of  
all joy and pleasures.  
Surdas says, all happiness  
resides in him.

‘हमारे निर्घन के जन राम’

सू. सा. 92

I belong to my devotees  
 and the devotees are mine.  
 O Arjuna, this is my vow,  
 and this cannot be changed.  
 To help my devotees  
 I rush barefoot  
 for their honour is my honour.  
 Whenever my devotee is in trouble  
 I go help.  
 His enemy becomes  
 my enemy.  
 It is with this thought  
 and consideration,  
 that I drive your chariot.  
 It you win, I win,  
 your defeat is my defeat  
 Listen, I  
 burn my bhakta's foe  
 with my Sudarshan discus.

'हम भक्तनि के भक्त हमारे'

सू. सा. 279



Unfathomable, indescribable  
 even by the holy books,  
 That one is held in Jasoda's lap.  
 Unreached by worship or penance  
 meditation and discipline  
 He plays in Nanda's courtyard.  
 He, who is called the Protector of the world  
 steals butter from this house and that.  
 Formless, and imperceivable himself,  
 now he desires gopis' bodies.  
 Who dwells in the heart through wisdom and knowledge  
 he wanders behind the cows and the calves.  
 He, who creates the universe, protects  
 and destroys it,  
 Enjoys the love play with the shephard women.  
 The creator of illusions, himself unseen,  
 dwells in groves and thickets  
 completely charmed  
 by Radha.

59

My mind runs in circles  
bewildered.  
Finding no support, nothing to hold  
in the worship of  
the formless.  
The one without an outline,  
without any attributes, or characteristics.  
In every way,  
considering it,  
inaccessible.  
Sur decides to sing of  
Incarnate God (Hari)  
And his various lilas.

O my Master,  
 please do not take into consideration  
 my faults and deficiencies.  
 Equal Eyed is your name,  
 So please save me.  
 One piece of iron is kept  
 in the house of worship, the other  
 is found at the butcher's.  
 The paras stone does not differentiate  
 changing both into gold, absolutely pure.  
 One is called a river,  
 the other, filled with dirty water  
 is a gutter.  
 When they both flow out  
 and meet Ganga, they assume  
 the same name, the same colour.  
 You are Brahman  
 and the body is maya.  
 Surdas has polluted his own, thoroughly.  
 Either you save him,  
 or you lose your vow of always helping your devotees.

‘हमारे प्रभु औगुन चित न धरौ’

सू. सा. 227

61

Where else, but with you,  
Can my heart get peace and joy.

Just as a bird, living on a ship,  
may fly out far,  
but returns to the ship,  
always.

How can I give up the splendour of the Lotus Eyed?  
Concentrate upon another deity?

The thirsting, stupid one gets a well dug,  
leaving the holy waters of Ganga.

Would a bee which has tasted the lotus pollen  
ever like the sourness of karil fruit ?

Surdas says, O Lord, who would want to give up  
the Cow of Wishes and  
milk a common goat?

‘मेरो मन अनत कहाँ सुख पावै’  
सू. सा. 168

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## Errata

<i>Page</i>	<i>Line</i>	<i>For</i>	<i>Read</i>
1	8	Committment	Commitment
2	12	with	in
2	12	regards	regard
2	26	honored	honoured
3	7	conquored	conquered
3	21	favors	favours
3	26	nobdy	nobody
3	33	favor	favour
4	13	twelvth	twelfth
5	17	throws a	throws
6	14	privilaged	privileged
6	16-17	privilaged	privileged
7	8	books	books,
7	17	manuscripts	manuscripts,
9	2	In	In the
9	34	color	colour
12	30	clear cut	clear-cut
13	22	honor	honour
13	36	his praise	His praise
14	27	his deeds	His deeds
15	15	color	colour
16	11	favor	favour
16	15	favored	favoured
16	20	favored	favoured
16	25	boava	bhava
16	38	clearcut	clear-cut
17	39	Govinalswami	Govindswami
20	11	grow unharmed	grow up unharmed
20	25	all are	are all
21	13	colors	colours
22	12	favor	favour
23	29	waly	walk
24	14	red handed	redhanded
28	21	context	contexts
29	22	over all	over-all
30	19	at the occasion	on the occasion
30	25	dishes;	dishes,
31	4	malhawah	malhaway
31	14	usingm ore	using more
32	20	Let, it be	Let it be,
32	22	preaching	preachings
32	23	is	are